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Captivity as Crisis Response: Migration, the Pandemic, and Forms of Confinement

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Captivity and Invisibilization as Crisis Response: Migration, the Pandemic, and Forms of Confinement

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During Europe's recent "refugee crisis," Italy responded to increased migrant arrivals by sea with progressively restrictive border and asylum policies. While crisis-response restrictions are perhaps unsurprising, those implemented since 2014 have produced a set of situations that appear, at least initially, paradoxical: Following Interior Minister Matteo Salvini's 2018 "Closed Ports" campaign, independently-operated rescue ships continue to be blocked from disembarking the migrants they have rescued. At the same time, asylum officials have rejected claims for protection at higher rates, while border officials deport a minority of those whose claims are rejected. Thus, under the guise of crisis management, some migrants are held captive at sea, unable to enter, while a growing undocumented population is held captive within the country, unable to leave.

In exploring this paradox, this paper outlines how contexts deemed crisis or emergency facilitate the production of new and changing forms of migrant captivity – a term I use to indicate modes of confinement beyond detention. Here, highlighting border policies developed in response to the pandemic, I show that captivity functions primarily not to contain, but to invisibilize.

Invisibilization as crisis management became especially salient during the pandemic, as migration and global health crises converged, and Italy detained arriving migrants on "quarantine ships" before setting foot in Italy. I discuss detention and deportability as forms of captivity that invisibilize, underscoring how they also function to racialize migrants. I also highlight critical opportunities for advocacy. For instance, migrant farmworkers referring to themselves as "the invisibles" have held marches protesting their legal and social precarity, especially during a global pandemic. My research draws on policy and media analysis and on ethnographic research I conducted before the pandemic at reception sites in the regions of Lazio, Calabria, and Molise.